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Mongolian-US Relations: Why Is Moscow Sanctioning Discussions?Summary

Mongolia's willingness to begin discussions with the United States on the establishment of diplomatic relations appears to be part of Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev's new Asian policy of promoting the USSR as a reasonable, responsible power interested in dialogue rather than confrontation. Such discussions complement Moscow's approval of the recent thaw in Sino-Mongolian relations and its announcement that it is considering the withdrawal of some Soviet troops from Mongolia. The Soviets may have sought to have the discussions start before the ninth round of Sino-Soviet political talks in October to provide Beijing another sign that they are willing to relax their tight grip on Mongolia and to prompt positive Chinese steps in the Sino-Soviet relationship. There almost certainly will be hard bargaining about the logistics of setting up and operating a US Embassy in Ulaan Baatar, and Moscow could still reconsider--as it apparently did in the 1960s and 1970s--and block a successful conclusion of the talks. For the moment, however, it appears that the Soviets have made a basic decision to open the Mongolian door a crack. []

We assume Moscow is calling the shots for Ulaan Baatar--as it has for the past 65 years. The questions are: What do the Soviets hope to gain from the Mongolian-US talks? And why move ahead now? []

This memorandum was prepared by [] Office of Soviet Analysis, in response to a request from Ambassador Gaston Sigur, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. Comments and queries are welcome and may be addressed to the Chief, Third World Activities Division, SOVA [].

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We have no direct evidence to go on, but it seems to us that the issue is best explained in the context of Gorbachev's overall policy toward Asia. Since assuming power he has attempted to reshape the USSR's image in Asia from that of a heavy-handed bully, ever-quick to flex its military might, to that of a responsible "Asian-Pacific" power interested in better relations with most regional states and in being accorded a role in the political and economic activity of the region commensurate with the USSR's superpower status. This shift in approach has included significant steps to improve at least the atmospherics, if not yet the substance, of Soviet relations with China and Japan. Moscow probably hopes that allowing Ulaan Baatar to establish relations with Washington would, coupled with the thaw in Sino-Mongolian relations already underway and a possible imminent reduction of Soviet forces in Mongolia, be interpreted by Asian states--above all, China--as evidence that the USSR genuinely wants improved regional relations. []

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The Kremlin also may calculate that its "green light" to Mongolian-US talks will benefit the Soviet-US relationship to some small degree. While there are many far more important issues on the Moscow-Washington agenda at this point, the Soviets may view the Mongolian gambit as a way to portray their new Asian policy as aimed at an understanding with the United States, not a reduction of US influence in the region. []

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Moscow's consideration of changes in its Mongolia policy apparently goes back at least to January (see Appendix for chronology of key events).

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The Spring Stumble

By spring Moscow had decided to give the go-ahead to Ulaan Baatar. In April the Mongolians passed a message through the Japanese to the US Embassy in Tokyo expressing the "strong hope" that relations could be normalized. Yet the Mongolians curiously refused to meet with a US Embassy officer from Beijing who traveled to Ulaan Baatar in May on a previously scheduled private visit. The Mongolian Foreign Ministry's failure to meet with the US diplomat probably is best explained by its surprise at the quickness of the US response to its April approach. The Japanese Embassy in Ulaan Baatar was not able to

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[redacted]

inform the Foreign Ministry until the morning the US diplomat arrived that he was prepared to receive any message for Washington. There probably was not enough time during the four days he was there to get approval from the bureaucracies in Ulaan Baatar and Moscow for a concrete proposal to the United States on beginning negotiations. The US Embassy in Tokyo later learned that the Mongolian Foreign Ministry did not intend its failure to receive the diplomat to be read as a signal of a change of heart. This version would appear to have been corroborated by the clearly prearranged pitch for establishing relations that the Mongolian DCM in Tokyo made to a US Embassy officer three weeks after the snub of the US diplomat in Ulaan Baatar. [redacted]

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The Mongolians' failure to make a more direct and authoritative attempt to reinitiate contact with the US probably was due to a combination of factors:

- The crush of events. The Mongolians had their party congress in May and "elections" to a new parliament in June. In addition, General Secretary Batmonh was in the USSR and Czechoslovakia for a month in July-August; Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu visited in early August (the highest-level Chinese visitor since the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s); and the Soviets and Mongolians almost certainly held intensive discussions this summer on the issue of a withdrawal of some Soviet forces, which Gorbachev revealed in his major speech in Vladivostok on 28 July.
- The embarrassment of a botched approach. The Mongolians may have been wary of being rebuffed by Washington if they took the first step and retabbed their request for discussions after appearing to have backed away in May.
- A reversion to past practice. As the Japanese Ambassador in Ulaan Baatar observed, traditional Mongolian behavior is to always let the other side take the initiative. [redacted]

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The Fall Recovery

Ulaan Baatar's sense of haste in beginning the talks between the US and Mongolian permanent representatives to the UN before 2 October also probably is due to a variety of reasons. By the time of the late August US approach through Ambassador Walters, the Mongolians probably had their act together on how to respond. From a national prestige angle, having Foreign Minister Dugersuren in New York while the first discussions were in progress might facilitate his being received by Ambassador Walters or possibly even a higher level State Department official. [redacted]

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Moscow may also have wanted the negotiations underway before the ninth round of Sino-Soviet political talks begins in October (exact dates have yet to be announced). The Soviets probably hope that the Chinese will regard the US-Mongolian discussions as a further indicator that the Kremlin is serious about at least slightly loosening its iron grip on Mongolia and will reciprocate with some concessions of their own on Sino-Soviet relations. It is also still possible that Moscow will couple the Mongolian-US gambit with an announcement either before or during the Beijing talks that it is withdrawing some troops from Mongolia. Deputy Foreign Minister Rogachev said in August that the Soviet-Mongolian talks on the subject would be completed soon.

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Foreign Minister Dugersuren's planned presence in New York while the talks are underway indicates that the Mongolians take them seriously and may even be willing to move forward rapidly to an agreement. However, the experience of the negotiations of the mid-1960s and again in the early 1970s, when Ulaan Baatar twice showed great interest in establishing relations and then abruptly backed away, calls for a heavy dose of caution. There probably are powerful voices in the Soviet military and KGB who are arguing against giving the United States a listening post in Mongolia. And the US will almost certainly face difficult negotiations with the Mongolians over the number of US diplomats to be allowed in country and their freedom of travel, embassy facilities, and communications arrangements--the apparent stumbling blocks in the past. Although it seems that this time around Moscow has already made a basic decision about opening the Mongolian door a crack, we should not rule out another change of heart.

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AppendixChronology of Major Events Affecting Mongolian Approach to the United States1986

21-25 January	Mongolian Defense Minister in Moscow. [redacted] [redacted]	25X1 25X1
23-25 January	Shevardnadze visits Ulaan Baatar. When Mongolians brought up question of establishing relations with the US, Shevardnadze reportedly said USSR did not object in principle but advised MPR to move slowly.	
Late February - early March	General Secretary Batmonh in Moscow for CPSU 27th Party Congress. Meets with Gorbachev on 3 March.	
April	Mongolian Embassy in Toyko, via the Japanese, passes message to US Embassy expressing "strong hope" that US-Mongolian relations could be normalized.	
Early May	US asks Japanese to tell Mongolians that US Embassy officer stationed in Beijing would be on a previously scheduled private trip to Ulaan Baatar 8-11 May and if they had anything to say on normalization, they should pass it on to him. Japanese Ambassador in Ulaan Baatar conveys this message on morning of 8 May to Mongolian MFA First Deputy Minister Yondon, who expresses surprise at the "sudden" US response to his "inquiry of an unofficial nature" earlier conveyed through the Japanese.	
8-11 May	US Embassy Beijing officer visits Ulaan Baatar but his request for meeting with MFA officials is turned down. US Embassy Tokyo later learns that the MFA was surprised by the sudden and untimely appearance of the US diplomat a few weeks before the Mongolian party congress. MFA officials said the failure to receive him was not a signal that the MPR has lost interest in discussing the establishment of relations with the US.	

26 May Mongolian DCM in Tokyo approaches US Embassy political officer at Argentine national day reception and says--with Soviet naval attache listening in--that "in my opinion there are no problems in establishing diplomatic relations between our two countries."

28 July Gorbachev announces in his Vladivostok speech that Soviet and Mongolian leadership are "at present" examining the question of withdrawing a "considerable number" of Soviet troops from Mongolia.

28 July Batmonh arrives in Moscow for his annual vacation in the USSR.

Early August Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Liu visits Ulaan Baatar. Highest level visit since Sino-Soviet split in 1960s. Signs consular treaty.

8 August Deputy Foreign Minister Rogachev, in interview with Christian Science Monitor, says Soviet-Mongolian talks on reduction of Soviet forces in Mongolia would be concluded soon.

12 August Batmonh and Gorbachev meet in Moscow. Communique routine. No hint of problems, but also no direct mention of troop withdrawal idea.

Late August US UN Perm Rep Vernon Walters approaches his Mongolian counterpart and proposes beginning discussions on normalization. Talks could be conducted by the two UN Perm Reps or at any other appropriate venue Mongolians wish.

17 September Mongolian UN Perm Rep tells Amb Walters that Mongolia would like to begin such discussions between the two of them. The Mongolian requests that the talks begin before his Foreign Minister arrives in New York on 2 October for UNGA. []

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